Embodied Interventions 2024: The Tentacular Inquiry of Performance

Mobility Architectures, Graphic Performance: Ways of Seeing Urban Trash

Our little exploratory inquiry into performance takes as its point of departure two linked polarities or tensions.

Body and City

The first case of polarity is the relationship between the body and the city. While we can see the urban environment as an expression of the body and its mobility, it is also possible to think about urban architectures and infrastructures as exerting a certain normative or disciplinary pressure back on the body. At stake in this tension is the almost contradictory double nature of accessibility: on the one hand, the city affords new forms of heightened and accelerated mobility according to shared needs and desires; on the other, the city restricts or constrains movement through public space according to the practical or imaginary limits of the built infrastructural environment. In thinking through this polarity, it is possible to draw on the resources of fields like disability studies, industrial engineering, or the science of myelination in the brain: in all cases, theorists in these fields try to articulate ways that augmentation is also limitation.

Performance and Document

The second polarity exists in the space between performance and documentation. As an interdisciplinary team, we approach this space from two different but ultimately converging angles: in performance art, the performance itself is typically elevated over the document (or 'score'), and the primary value consists in the extemporaneous experience between the artist and their audience; in ethnographic research, the performance (of participant observation, of 'fitting in' or even 'going native') is typically subordinated to the document that it is meant to produce (field notes, ethnographic codes, and ultimately the research paper). Our goal here was to contribute to continued efforts in both fields to close or reimagine this gap between performance and document. In thinking through this polarity, we drew inspiration from the field of speculative cartography, the new nesting practices of bower birds, artists like Yves Klein, and the theme of inscription in cultural theories like those of Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari.

Making Conversation

In both cases, our ways of thinking through the opposed or related terms were somehow dissatisfying: while the terms clearly constitute each other in important ways (body and city, performance and document), we also felt certain gaps or slippages between the concepts at work. The purpose of our project is to play around in the conceptual space created by these tense linkages, to intervene creatively in the problems that arise at their intersections, and to imagine ways to put these polarities in conversation, in order to see what they might have to teach us about mobility, aesthetics, and performance. This document attempts to chart the meandering paths we followed in this mutual effort of urban pedagogy. What can you expect to see emerge? Maps, trash, an alternative politics of the excremental, and a revaluation of 'abject' urbanities.

The Map

One of the best ways to think through both of our polarities is with the concept of the map.

Maps express the relationship between body and city through their twin condensation of urban space and visualization of bodily mobility: the salient features of the mobile body express themselves through the decisions made by mapmakers about what to include in the condensed version of the city that they present. The needs and capabilities of the body determine how the city is mapped; the map in its turn determines how the city is inhabited and navigated. Bodies can also be thought of as kinds of maps. The best example of this might be how any creeping vine maps out how the sun moves through a room, but we can also interpret tattooing practice as playing with this latent cartographic potential of the body. The city maps itself onto and into the body as the body is marked by urban space and learns how to move through it effectively.

The map also elides performance and document. As a technical document, the map is there to be taken up in the performance of mobility. Yet the map is not simply the beginning-point of urban mobility, as it is also and at the same time the result of a more or less normative attitude towards movement through the urban space. As a performative document, maps are in this sense both descriptive and prescriptive — as they rearrange the very space they are meant to capture or represent, they constantly undermine or overwrite themselves. In other words, just like all other infrastructures of urban mobility, maps begin to crumble as soon as they are put to use.

Visual artists like Angela Henderson have intervened creatively at the limits of what it might mean to 'perform' a map. How can the different elements of the urban environment refer to each other cartographically through or across the medium of the body? How can embodied interventions support more capacious maps? Much of our work on this short project was to follow through on this possibility inherent in the basic activity of mapping to incorporate heterogenous elements of body and city, performance and document.

Three or Four Graphics

If the cartographic idiom was one of the first conceptual themes to emerge from our collaboration, it remains closely linked to the calligraphic and choreographic idioms of Eija's previous work on urban art pedagogy. What is the relationship between these three graphic forms? Coming from the Ancient Greek *graphein* (to scratch, mark, draw, or write), this shared prefix already suggests the ways in which document production emerges from a scene of inscription that, like the ethnographic, is somehow also performative, active, and interventional.

This suggestion is especially present in the term 'choreography' (dance-writing or dance-inscription), which can refer to both the physical coordination of movement in space and the document or score which is meant to regulate that movement. With the term 'calligraphy' (beauty-writing), a degree of value judgement enters this conceptual space. How can a project of mapping out urban mobility make some kind of productive intervention into the aesthetics of the body and the city? How can a cartographic rearrangement of the visual field — a new kind of spatial calligraphy — also serve to expand the political imaginary of urban space?

Trash as a Teacher

One place we thought it might be useful to get started was with trash. Theorists such as Brenda Chalfin have argued that the 'dirty' infrastructures of the city constitute a vibrant political field, in part through the way in which they link public space and intimate space. We see the same vibrance or vitality in the never-fully-functional infrastructures of trash that help to constitute urban space and to organize urban mobility. Following Chalfin, we argue that following the people who intervene creatively in the movement of trash through the city — sanitation workers, but also participants in the informal recycling economy and the alternatively housed — might generate instructive lessons about the submerged political potential of trash as a resource.

What can we learn from our desire to abscond trash into infrastructures which will transport it far from the city and from our sight? When trash spills over the limits of its intended infrastructures into public space, what does the way in which we interact with it or avoid it have to teach us about our relationship to mobility? What do so-called trash objects have to teach us about how its former users have inhabited space and moved through the city? Is there a useful way to map the city differently through an effort to read, repurpose, or rearrange its trash?

Before getting to a description of the main 'product' that we've imagined as a response to these questions, I'd like to briefly unpack some of the key conceptual resources that we've used to think about the 'problem' of trash as it's related to urban mobility.

The Visual Field of Mobility

Moving and being moved through the city requires paying attention to a densely-populated visual field. All sorts of signs and architectural *dispositifs* shape our trajectories and help us get where we're going. Following the subtle disciplinary pressure exerted by the flow of traffic keeps movement streamlined through the closely-packed urban space. Gridlike formations help to keep things predictable and navigable as we traverse underground, street level, and elevated passageways. We learn what to pay attention to and what to ignore in order to keep moving.

At the same time, this hardened visual field of 'normal' transit or movement sits on top of and more or less passively obscures other urban realities. Like eddies in a current: abandoned lots, dead ends, sleeping bodies, and piles of detritus are first bypassed and ultimately subsumed by the infrastructures of typical mobility. This direction of attention away from the abandoned and the useless is, of course, an implicitly political gesture.

The Vitality of the Excremental

But what is hidden from and by this normative visual field? Chalfin, writing about the sanitation infrastructures in Tema, Ghana, names this whole network of suppressed substances and technologies as 'excremental'. While there are clear dangers in writing about trash and the people who live most closely to it through the terminology of the excremental, we also find a lot of hopefulness in the moves Chalfin makes to deepen our respect for the political value of objects (or communities) with this kind of abject status. The trick is to see shit differently.

History and Trajectory

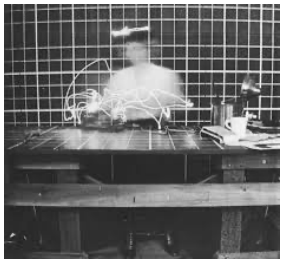
Deeper respect for the collective history of difficult substances makes them easier to talk about, easier to track and trace, and easier to creatively redirect or repurpose. In writing our way through the dirty realities of urban life, we might find that the broken infrastructures of waste still offer us something sturdy enough to hold on to. Trash objects are all rich with story, and are often very beautiful. Our hope in this project is that, by drawing attention to the human histories connected to and preserved by urban trash, we might gesture towards a reorganization of the visual field of city mobility. If these excremental objects can become more vibrant, more important, and more noticeable, newly possible trajectories might emerge for them and for us.

We argue that there is something to be found in this practice of moving with trash as opposed to only moving around it. It's in joining this principle to our interest in the spaces between body and city, and between performance and document, that our little art project finally took real shape.

Refashioning Trash

In the performance-art tradition of wearables and of working with found materials, we imagine a number of apparatuses that might creatively or productively take up trash in an effort to explore the gap between the body and the city's infrastructures. Trash comes from the body and is organized by the needs of the body; once a product is used by the body, it becomes trash as it is surrendered or handed off to the urban trash infrastructures. The formal infrastructural systems — public garbage bins, black bags which move according to the choreographic score of local collection schedules — minimize the visual presence of trash in the city. Informal infrastructures perform a different kind of graphic mapping: levels of public investment in or attitudes towards a given space can be measured through the ways that litter writes itself into the visual field. In both cases, the space between the city and the body is somehow mapped or traced out or by this vital, vibrant, and excremental material. In both cases, the body can intervene to recover some of the glamour and mystery of trash, that curious flow of objects between design and erasure.

At the same time, these suits of wearable trash would exist in a space between performance and document. These cartographic features of trash mean that such suits of found material can, like a map, speak to where the maker/user has been, how they've moved through the city, and what features of the visual field have caught their eye. Trash objects have a history and trash suits — by temporarily aligning the trajectories of all that trash — might be translated into a story that weaves these histories together. The performative element of this refashioning of trash should be more clear: by rearranging the status of trash in the visual field, the wearer of such a suit disrupts the all-too-convenient invisibility of trash which allows us to move through the city without noticing it. In this sense, the trash suit is part of an embodied intervention into urban mobility.



Trash as a Resource

Our goal was to play with the visual field of the city in order to promote a new kind of creative resource-fullness — a new kind of aesthetic and ethical vitality for these ‘abject’ substances. But this does not just mean promoting the (crucial) skills of scavenging and recycling; we also want to make use of trash as an artistic resource — a part of the environment which might solicit attention and stimulate imagination. Take some time while moving through the city to think about what obligations you might have to its trash. Think about how you might be otherwise moved by it — both affectively and in terms of your mobility. So, go ahead. The success of our embodied intervention is now in your hands, or in your eyes. And don’t forget to have fun.